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## Plan forms for flood damage repair

Intent to file lawsuit: Environmental group wants rechanneling work at Mesquite to stop or conform with regulations

By Mark Havnes

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ST. GEORGE - Washington County officials began fashioning a master plan for the Santa Clara River on Tuesday to repair infrastructure, shore up banks and clean up debris where flooding caused extensive damage earlier this month.

The Emergency Watershed Program (EWP) will be sponsored by Washington County and include the county's water conservancy district and the cities of St. George and Santa Clara, which sustained the most destruction when heavy rains swelled the river beyond its banks on Jan. 10 and 11. In some cases, expensive homes disappeared as the muddy torrents undermined their lots.

The EWP also will address how to prevent damage from future flooding, given a snowpack now in excess of 300 percent of normal in the river's drainage.

Experts with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which will be responsible for shoring up the damaged banks, explained how the process will work.

As the officials met in St. George, a Western environmental group filed a notice with the U.S. Department of the Interior of its intent to file a lawsuit if work being done to rechannel the Virgin River by the city of Mesquite, Nev., 80 miles south of St. George, does not stop or conform with federal regulations.

Floodwaters in the Virgin River and its drainages south of St. George in Arizona and Nevada also caused damage

in small communities, including Mesquite.

Michelle Harrington, the Rivers Program Director with the 12,000-member Center for Biological Diversity, said the group filed the document to let Mesquite know it has 60 days to consult with officials with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service before proceeding with mitigation efforts.

Daniel Patterson, an ecologist with the center, said Mesquite's rechanneling work is "doing great damage to the web of life and integrity of ecosystem along the river."

Helen Hawkins, interim field manager with the federal Bureau of Land Management office in Las Vegas, said Tuesday all parties involved plan to meet today in Mesquite to try to resolve differences in how the work should proceed.

Officials in Washington County, so far, have complied with federal and state regulations in forming the EWP for the Santa Clara and are waiting for funding from Congress for the project, estimated at around \$60 million.

Janet Johnson, contracting expert for the NRCS office in Salt Lake City, told the EWP representatives that the keys to getting the project going are funding and land easements. She said that once all easements are secured, she can begin taking bids on contracts for the work.

NRCS engineer Michael Huntamer said that work will include shoring up the banks with stones, called rip-rap, and in some places may involve a layer of specialized textile on unstable soil.

Work could begin as early as Monday, he said.